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ABSTRACT

For the past 25 years, controversy has developed over the value and use of African-American (AA) English. This study examined the opinions of AAs from a variety of backgrounds and communities in California and Georgia to obtain their views on AA English; its place in the school, in the community, and in AA heritage; and its role in the futures of AA students. The results from 51 completed questionnaires and four interviews indicated that AAs have varying opinions about AA English. Most educators in California were aware of the goal of recognizing AA English in the classroom, but it did not appear to be a topic of discussion of school boards and state legislatures nationwide. Most of the respondents felt that some AAs do speak with a dialect, but they did not believe there was a language known as AA English. Overall, most of the respondents agreed that AA English is a valuable part of their heritage, however, it had no place in the classroom, and its use beyond one's community can affect students' opportunities and economic success. Appendices include respondents' demographic data and the survey questionnaire. (Contains 8 references.) (GLR)

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ED 374 166

AFRICAN-AMERICAN ATTITUDES CONCERNING AFRICAN-AMERICAN ENGLISH

BY

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Abstract

There have been significant studies done on the topic of African-American English. For the past quarter-century, a controversy over the recognition, value and use of African-American English has captured the attention of media, professionals, educators and parents nationwide. This study examined the opinions of African-Americans from a variety of backgrounds and communities to obtain their views on African-American English: its place in the school, in the community, in African-American heritage and its role in the futures of African-American students. The results of the questionnaires and interviews indicated African-Americans have varying opinions about African-American English. Most of the subjects felt that some African-Americans do speak with a dialect, but they did not believe there was a language known as African-American English. Overall, most of the people surveyed agreed that African-American English is a valuable part of their heritage. However, it has no place in the classroom and use of African-American English beyond one's community, can affect students opportunities and economic success.

INTRODUCTION

African-American students speak and write in a unique manner. Some educators call the vernacular used by African-Americans, African-American English. Others characterize it as bad English or poor spelling and grammar which needs to be corrected. There has been and continues to be progressive discussions and debates concerning the use of African-American English in schools by African-American students. There has also been a demand to evaluate the manner in which African-American students are being taught English in public schools because African-American students continue to have problems mastering basic reading, writing and composition skills.

Statement of the Problem

How does one define the way some African-Americans speak? Is it a dialect or a language? Also, what is its' relationship to standard English? Dialect is defined as a language considered part of another language. Language is defined as the special vocabulary, usage, or style of a particular group. African-American English is also known as Negro English, Negro Nonstandard English, Negro Dialect, Negro Speech, Black English, Black Dialect, African-American Vernacular, and Ebonics. Standard English is defined as the universal language in which most books, magazines and newspapers are written.

Rationale

The debate over African-American English and its role in the lives of African-American students has been constant since the 1960s. (McCrum and Cran, 1986) African-American English is said to be recognized but misunderstood by whites. It is thought of as lazy, ungrammatical or even suggesting low intellect. It is thought that the manner in which African-Americans speak is the language of a disadvantaged past, an obstacle to advancement, and even as something better unlearned, denied or forgotten. (McCrum and Cran, 1986) McCrum and Cran go on to say, "No other form of speech in the history of the English language has been so deplored, debated and defended." (p. 195)

When the controversy over African-American English began, there was a demand from the African-American community that African-American English be recognized as, "An effective medium for intellectual work." (Morse, 1972. p. 81) People who agreed with the previous statement believed that African-American students should have been accepted the way they were. "Black English is as natural as an afro or dark skin." (Morse, 1972. p. 81) African-Americans questioned why their children had to learn standard English. The reason was, "Standard English is the English which most books, magazines and newspapers are written." (Morse, p. 83, 1972)

In California, public schools are struggling to meet the needs of African-American students. "Our dropout rate is the highest. We have the worst test scores. We have fewer children graduating qualified for university admissions, and we have a lot more of our children trapped in dead-end classes. It's a very bad situation." (Asimov, p. A-9, 1994)

Many African-American college students are still exhibiting so called nonstandard English patterns after twelve years of education. They are not learning the essential skills in elementary and high school that will ultimately guarantee them a reasonable amount of success in college and in the world. They are not only exhibiting what are termed nonstandard English patterns, but their reading and writing skills are years behind the national norms. (Fitts, 1991) Often African-American college students find themselves in their freshman year, taking remedial English classes. The habitual use of African-American English instead of standard English is an obstacle that many African-American students must overcome in order to achieve economic, social, and vocational success. Many African-American students think learning standard English means they will have to give up a part of their culture to the white culture. "Students cannot be forced to choose, but the goal should be communication beyond the neighborhood." (Kizza, 1991. p. 9)

Background and Need

A major goal of public education is to increase a student's social mobility and vocational success. It is believed by some that education has failed African-Americans because it has refused to see African-American English as a legitimate form of communication and public school have also failed to develop sufficient methods to teach African-American students standard English. (Fitts, 1991) Because of this twofold failure, "Many African-American students never learn standard English in school and thus are essentially denied the economic, social, and vocational success that is the express goal of the school system through its graduates." (Fitts, 1991. p. 3) African-American students continue to fail at alarming rates in our public schools today.

Hypothesis

Many African-Americans are not aware of the fact that there is a recognized language that is part of their culture. Many African-Americans think that there is only one English language and anything else is an excuse for deficient English and grammar skills. Some African-Americans are aware of the use of an African-American dialect but think it is the method of speaking used by poor and uneducated African-Americans. Some say standard English is right, therefore anything else is wrong. The opinions African-Americans will have about the recognition, value and use of African-American English

instruction in African-American English. The researcher believes that much of the focus on the difference between standard English and African-American English is unnecessary. Instead Williamson-Ige feels that educators should be focusing on motivation, "Unless a need is created within these students to 'want' to learn, they may comprehend little learning material at all." (p. 28)

Fitts (1991), did an expressive language test of English grammar and composition skills on an undetermined number of African-American college students. Approximately eighty-five percent of the students tested had the following responses during the test:

- /th/ voiceless - this sound is either omitted, substituted, or distorted in the medial and/or final positions.
(Examples: wif/with; tooofbrush/toothbrush.)
- /th/ voiced - this sound is substituted in the initial and final positions.
(Examples: dis/this; de/the; dem/them; smoov/smooth.)
- /shr/ as in shrimp. Substitution of /skr/ or /str/. We hear skrimp or strimp.
- /str/ as in street. Substitution of /skr/. We hear, "I live on Hall skreet."
- /skr/ as in scratch. Substitution of /str/. We hear, "The cat stratched me."

Other words commonly mispronounced are:

- ask is pronounced axe
- library is pronounced liberry
- think and thank are often misused. (Example: I thank that's right.)
- children is pronounced chirren
- Dropping of the vocalic schwa which represent /r/ in four.

(Example: fo') (Fitts, 1991. p. 4)

In conclusion, Fitts' study shows that African-American students consistently use different syntax and pronunciation with a number of words.

Kizza (1991) presented a paper which focused on four areas concerning African-American English. One, educators must teach African-American students to be proud of their language, African-American English. Educators must help to clear up misconceptions about African-American English so that African-American students will feel confident and secure when using their language. Kizza says that instilling pride in African-American students to use African-American English isn't difficult. It begins with an attitude change from the public. "They equate being different with being ignorant and deprived, especially when it comes to the English language; if you do not talk exactly like I do, you must be ignorant of the English language; you cannot possibly know English." (Kizza, 1991. p. 2)

Secondly, once the students are aware of their dialect and feel comfortable using it, educators can begin teaching African-American students the differences between African-American English and standard English.

"They have to realize that they are making mistakes in a dialect other than their own; otherwise they will think that we are confronting them and questioning their ability to use their language." (Kizza, 1991. p. 3)

Third, educators must become educated on the structure of African-American English in order to identify the differences between mistakes in the dialect and differences in the language. Educators do not have to speak the language says Kizza, they just need to understand and respect it. (Kizza, 1991)

Lastly, African-American students need to be taught that there is a difference between standard English and the vernacular spoken by most American whites. Standard English is not the white man's language, "If all whites excelled in the use of standard English, our remedial classes would be one hundred percent non-white." (Kizza, 1991. p. 5)

Kizza concludes, by stating that African-American students can speak in their dialect when it is appropriate. However, the students need to learn to switch dialects as appropriate. "To put it in Professor Locke's terms: 'It's OK (for our students) to rap as long as they can talk stocks and bonds on Wall Street.'" (Kizza, 1991. p. 7)

Schools throughout the state of California are questioning how to help African-American students learn better communication skills. "Even those opposed to the use of African-American dialect in the classroom are acknowledging that black students have a serious language problem, and the traditional approach - to drill them and correct their 'improper' English - is not working." (Kershaw, 1994. p. A-1)

One of the latest twists in the conflict concerning African-American English and standard English is whether African-American students qualify for federally funded bilingual education programs. In February 1994, Willie Hamilton, principal of the Webster Academy in Oakland, California gave sixty-two African-American students in grades one through six the test used to place foreign students in English classes. His results found that twenty-six students scored "Non-English Speaking", thirty-two scored "Limited English-Speaking" and only four scored "Fluent". (Kershaw, 1994. p. A-13)

Second grade teacher Zerita Sharp, in the Oakland Unified School District, said, "If the kids don't have a teacher who is astute and aware of what's going on, they just get left by the wayside." (Kershaw, 1994. p. A-13) Linguists at the University of California, Berkeley are working on forming a summer training institute for teachers to help them better educate African-American students.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were African-American females and males. They ranged from ages eighteen to seventy. The subjects included family members, friends, and co-workers of the author from various educational and socio-economic backgrounds. A number of subjects requested additional questionnaires to distribute to their associates. The subjects lived in Alameda County, Contra Costa County, Marin County, San Francisco County, and Georgia. (See Appendix A for demographic information results).

Materials

The subjects were asked to complete twenty-nine questions about their attitude on African-American English. Responses to the questionnaire were assessed using a five point Likert scale. Four interviews were also conducted on the topic.

Procedure

The questionnaires were distributed by mail. Seventy questionnaires were distributed and fifty-one were returned. The questionnaires were anonymous. Subjects were asked to respond to the questionnaires by choosing one of five choices: Strongly Agree (SD), Agree (A), Uncertain or Undecided (U), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD).

Results

The results of the study show that African-Americans have varying views about the origins, definition and appropriateness of African-American English. The results are scored in percentages. (See Appendix D for the questionnaire)

#	SA	A	U	D	SD
1	21	51	12	16	0
2	10	23	18	39	10
3	20	25	22	25	10
4	33	51	6	4	6
5	23	39	6	22	10
6	12	43	18	21	6
7	12	22	31	23	12
8	14	23	16	37	10
9	12	39	12	29	8
10	25	47	12	14	2
11	15	31	25	15	14
12	65	25	6	0	4
13	29	27	12	12	20
14	43	53	2	2	0
15	51	33	4	2	0
16	37	43	8	10	2
17	44	44	6	4	2
18	31	39	10	16	4
19	37	33	12	6	12
20	25	37	18	10	10
21	49	49	0	2	0
22	69	25	2	2	2
23	39	41	10	6	6
24	14	16	45	25	0
25	16	47	10	21	6
26	47	49	0	4	0
27	49	35	4	8	4
28	35	33	12	12	8
29	10	22	27	23	18

Discussion

There is much to be debated about African-American English. Many of the subjects do not consider African-American English a language. Most comments and responses to interviews stated that some of the people had heard of African-American Dialect (or Black Dialect) but they were not aware that it was a language nor did they see any reason why it should be a language. "I don't believe there is any need for African-American English. Will there be a Hispanic English or a Vietnamese English." Another repeated comment was that African-American English is appropriate in the neighborhood but not in the classroom, "You don't go to French class speaking German and expect to pass do you?" Many subjects asked, "Who is the authority on African-American English? What are the rules or standards?" A number of comments were made that African-American English should not be compared to Southern Dialect and finally, many of the subjects did not know what the difference was between standard English and African-American English, or even what standard English was. "I thought English was what you learned in English 101." One interesting fact that occurred as a result of this study was that many of the subjects listen more carefully to the way people speak, including themselves.

Conclusion

The results of the study support the research hypothesis. Many African-Americans are not aware of the fact that there is a recognized language which is part of their culture. Most educators in California are aware of the goal of recognizing African-American English in the classroom however, it does not appear to be a topic of discussion by school boards and state legislatures nationwide.

Most of the subjects said that they speak using so called African-American English when it is appropriate, however the word appropriate is stressed. The definition and terminology of different elements of African-American heritage have been debated over the years. For instance, should African-American students be taught African-American history in school because it will increase self esteem. Or, what term do people of African ancestry use to describe themselves: Negro, Black, Afro-American, or African-American? The debate over the value and role of African-American English in African-American heritage probably will be ongoing too.

Regardless of the many different opinions about African-American English, it was agreed that in order for African-American students to be successful they must be able to communicate outside of their neighborhood. Therefore, African-American students need to be able to communicate in standard English.

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Appendix A

Demographic Information Results

1. What is the highest level of education completed:

High School	28%
Undergraduate School	57%
Graduate School	15%
2. Which of the following categories best describes your occupation:

Administrative	25%
Service Industry	12%
Social Service	18%
Education	21%
Unemployed or Retired	6%
Other	18%
3. Which of the following categories fits your salary range:

20,000 and below	25%
20,000 - 40,000	57%
40,000 - 60,000	12%
60,000 - 80,000	6%
80,000 - above	0%
4. Which of the following categories represent your age:

18 - 30	31%
31 - 40	29%
41 - 50	34%
51 - 60	4%
61 - 70	2%
5. Where do you live:

Alameda County 18%, Contra Costa County 6%, Marin County 20%,
San Francisco County 36%, Georgia 18%, Other 2%
6. Describe where you live as one of the following:

Rural 8% Suburbs 39% Urban 53%
7. Where do your parents live?

West Coast	10%
South	76%
East Coast	12%
Midwest	0%
Northeast	0%
Other	0%

Appendix B

Letter of Introduction

Dear Study Participant,

This study is about African-American English. The goal of the study is to find out two things: First, African-American's Attitudes about African-American English and second, how do African-Americans hold on to part of their heritage, while at the same time making sure that African-American children are prepared to take advantage of all future opportunities.

The information collected will be used by Linda Carter as part of the requirement for a Master of Science in Education at Dominican College of San Rafael, California.

You may keep this cover letter for future reference. If you choose to participate in this research study, please answer the following questions and then return the questionnaire to me as soon as possible. I am enclosing a self addressed stamped envelope.

There should be no physical or psychological risks associated with participation in the study. If you have any questions, problems, or discomfort with the study, please contact the researcher immediately at (415) 485-3287.

The results of the study will be available for your examination. Please call Dominican College Department of Education (415) 485-3287 to request a summary of the study.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Sincerely,

Linda C. Carter
52 Yosemite Road
San Rafael, CA 94903

Appendix C

Demographic Information

1. What is the highest level of education completed (state if degree was earned):

High School ☐ _____

Undergraduate School ☐ _____

Graduate School ☐ _____

2. Which of the following categories best describes your occupation:

Administrative ☐

Service Industry ☐

Social Service ☐

Education ☐

Unemployed or Retired ☐

Other ☐ _____

3. Which of the following categories fits your salary range:

20,000 and below ☐

20,000 - 40,000 ☐

40,000 - 60,000 ☐

60,000 - 80,000 ☐

80,000 - above ☐

4. Which of the following categories represent your age:

20 - 30 ()

31 - 40 ()

41 - 50 ()

51 - 60 ()

61 and older ()

5. Where do you live:

Alameda County () Contra Costa County () Marin County ()

San Francisco County () Georgia () Other _____

6. Describe where you live as one of the following:

Rural () Suburbs () Urban ()

7. Where do your parents live?

West Coast ()

South ()

East Coast ()

Midwest ()

Northeast ()

Other () Please state _____

Appendix D

Questionnaire

Please respond to the following statements concerning your attitude about African-American English. There are five possible responses to each statement: SA (Strongly Agree), A (Agree), U (Uncertain or Undecided), D (Disagree), SD (Strongly Disagree). Read each statement carefully and then mark the appropriate box to describe how you feel.

* African-American English is also known as African-American Vernacular English, Black Dialect, Negro Nonstandard English, Negro Speech, Negro Dialect and Ebonics.

1. African-Americans have a unique way of speaking.
SA () A () U () D () SD ()
2. African-Americans have a recognized written and spoken language.
SA () A () U () D () SD ()
3. African-American students should be able to express themselves in public school classrooms in African-American English.
SA () A () U () D () SD ()
4. African-American English is not an excuse for poor grammar and poor phonic skills.
SA () A () U () D () SD ()

5. African-American English is not the language of poor and uneducated African-Americans.
SA () A () U () D () SD ()
6. African-American English is very similar to the Southern Dialect spoken in the Southern United States.
SA () A () U () D () SD ()
7. African-American English is the language originally spoken by the slaves.
SA () A () U () D () SD ()
8. If an African-American were to say, "Take away dose rosy lips" that would be an example of African-American English.
SA () A () U () D () SD ()
9. If an African-American were to say, "We goin to de sto" that would be an example of African-American English.
SA () A () U () D () SD ()
10. African-American English is not bad English and the way white people speak is not necessarily good English.
SA () A () U () D () SD ()

11. African-American English is a part of the African-American culture that should be preserved.

SA () A () U () D () SD ()

12. African-American students should also learn to read, write and speak in standard English.

SA () A () U () D () SD ()

13. Standard English is not the white man's language.

SA () A () U () D () SD ()

14. African-American students should learn standard English because it is the language in which most books, magazines and newspapers are written.

SA () A () U () D () SD ()

15. Lack of knowledge of standard English may limit African-American student's opportunities and their economic success.

SA () A () U () D () SD ()

16. It is the responsibility of teachers to teach African-American students standard English.

SA () A () U () D () SD ()

17. It is the responsibility of parents to teach African-American students standard English.

SA () A () U () D () SD ()

18. African-American students should speak in standard English at home, and also at school.

SA () A () U () D () SD ()

19. It won't hurt African-American students to use African-American English at home as long as they know the difference between African-American English and standard English.

SA () A () U () D () SD ()

20. Speaking and writing in African-American English can affect a student's reading skills.

SA () A () U () D () SD ()

21. Even though many African-American students live in communities where African-American English may be acceptable, African-American students still need to learn standard English.

SA () A () U () D () SD ()

22. When a person goes to apply and interview for a job, they are judged by the way they communicate.

SA () A () U () D () SD ()

23. Teachers should evaluate African-American students the same way they evaluate all students.

SA () A () U () D () SD ()

24. The grammar and pronunciation of African-American students is different from standard English but not an incorrect form of standard English.

SA () A () U () D () SD ()

25. For some African-American students, learning standard English will not be easy.

SA () A () U () D () SD ()

26. African-American students who are not going to college still need to learn standard English.

SA () A () U () D () SD ()

27. African-American students need to begin learning differences between African American English and standard English in elementary school.

SA () A () U () D () SD ()

28. Educators need to recognize African-American English as a language in order to help African-American students learn standard English.

SA () A () U () D () SD ()

29. African-American students are failing in school in large numbers because of their inability to understand lessons, which are written standard English.

SA () A () U () D () SD ()

Appendix E

Interview Questions

Hello, (Participant's name). My name is Linda Carter and I am a graduate student at Dominican College. I am conducting a study for my Master of Science degree in Education: Curriculum and Instruction. I would like to discuss with you your feelings about African-American English. The interview should last approximately 30 minutes.

1. Define in your own words African-American English?
2. Where did you learn this information?
3. Do you think African-American students should be allowed to write and speak in African-American English in school? Why?
4. Do you think there could be any drawbacks to allowing African-American students to write and speak in African-American English?
5. Do you think you use more African-American English or standard English when you speak.
6. Do you think you use more African-American English or standard English than you write?
7. What do you think your parents speak?

- 2
8. Do you think you may have received lower grades or have faced any discrimination because of the way you speak and or write? A) If the answer is standard English in questions 5, 6, 7, or 8, ask Where and when did you learn standard English? Do you think you did better in school because you used standard English instead of African-American English? Have you ever felt embarrassed when you have heard an African-american speak African-American English or use African-American English as an excuse or poor English. English?
9. Do you think African-American students should use standard English all of the time?
10. What should African-American parents due to help their children learn standard English?
11. Statistics show that African-american students are failing in large numbers in school as a result of their not being fluent in standard English. How should educators proceed with educating African-American students?